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Living on the Frontier of Knowledge

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It is a happy privilege to participate in your Honors Day, and to add my bit of homage paid to the students for what they have accomplished and for what they promise yet to do. Let me urge you students to enjoy these awards now, because you will learn all too soon that every bit of recognition you receive is but an invitation to more tasks, more responsibilities. Because you are in some manner especially gifted, we honor you, and we warn you that you have much to do in the age that is ahead.

Yesterday, I had occasion to talk to an audience of seniors graduating from college. They were our seniors at the University of Dallas; and I suppose I looked at them not wholly objectively, for certainly the affections grow in a period of four years in which students and faculty share a campus and a common experience. But if I am to judge by the hundreds of indications for which we learn to look, in estimating the capabilities and potentials of young men and women, I have to admit a certain satisfaction with the audience I saw before me. It was our honors day, and a long list of honors was read off--Woodrow Wilson Scholarships for graduate study, Fulbrights for study abroad, National Science Fellowships, and countless others, enough to be impressive--and yet, it was not the honors which the class had won that impressed me: it was the realization that these young

people were mature--were persons of consequence already. The four years they had spent with us had accomplished what we had hoped they would accomplish.

And let me say that that is no small accomplishment. Those four years have been years of rapid change. For one thing, automation suddenly flowered. When this graduating class entered the University in 1961, magnetic ink checks were just beginning to appear. The First National Bank in Dallas put in its computer in 1962. Your parents began to receive their bills on punched cards about that time and later. And every time those holes appeared in a new place, someone's job disappeared. Fewer people work for the telephone company now than did ten years ago, though the volume of business has multiplied many times. Oh, there has not been any vast unemployment because of technocracy; an expanding economy has taken care of that problem. But the jobs have shifted; the tasks done have changed. This change has gone on at all levels from janitor to president. We are in the midst of a vast economic revolution, and I think we might have cause to question whether a college education begun four years ago is a suitable one today.

Let me point out changes other than economic ones during the past four years. It was in 1962 that the first session of the Vatican Council began. The changes generated by this session are still going on and will continue, effecting enormous changes in the Church and in society. One of its Protestant observers, Dr.

Albert Outler, has said that it would have been impossible to predict five years ago the changes that have been made in the Church and the progress of ecumenism.

Society has changed in other ways. There has been a resurgence of design and a new appreciation of works of art. There is a confidence among artisans of all sorts that new objects of taste will find a general acceptance. The flood of paperback books of remarkably high quality testifies to the generally developed desire for individual intellectual selection--a major step beyond the ready-made selections of that huge promotional device--the Book-of-the-Month Club. The film, and even our comic strips, show signs of imaginative depth and complexity of idea.

The point of all this is that during the past four years, during a time of relative peace, quite drastic changes have occurred in our society. And thus one is led to ask, "What of the next four years?"

If you will allow me to don the robes of an astrologer for a while and see what the stars might say of the future, I think I can tell you that the next four years, the years when you are in college, will be years of even more drastic change.

Indeed, it is an age of great promise you are facing, one of the great ages of history, if I read the stars right. But it will not be an easy age. It will be one which will demand courage of an order you have not yet imagined. I am not speaking of our exploration of space; that takes courage of an order we <u>can</u> ima-

gine. But we might think of space for a moment and of the importance it does have for us. There is very little knowledge waiting for us in space that we do not have available on our own planet, and there is little possibility of economic value in space. And yet it is important that we explore it. It is important because this process is the only likely way we have of getting at knowledge which is available to us here but which we would not undertake to investigate because of its great difficulty. We are living on the frontier of knowledge, whereas in past ages man's frontiers have been physical and external. Ours is a frontier so hard to penetrate that only when we take upon ourselves some daring and public task are we willing to strike out into that obscure and unknown land beyond the frontier. Each of you will be called on for such a journey; and it will test every bit of character that has been developed in you. As one of the recent popes has said, it is no longer permissible for anyone to be mediocre. If we could see you several years from now we should know whether we have been right in calling you an honor student.

The acceptance of the public task is the mark of the hero; and if, as I have been saying, that heroism in our day must be in the realm of knowledge, then you who must control and guide the new age might reasonably ask: how well does a university education fit us to be public heroes? How well will it enable us to discharge our responsibilities?

Over the past few centuries, ever since the advent of rationalism and the consequent loss of cultural wholeness, the aim of university study has not been to shape the public man who is at one with his community and guards its values, but to produce the isolated intellectual who pursues his own lonely truth. Up until very recently, the university-educated person was expected to become one of the savants of the society, one of the wise men, or to become a member of a small learned profession, and later a practitioner of a specialized technology--engineering, architecture, animal husbandry, teaching. The liberal arts tradition of Oxford and Cambridge were somewhat different, it is true, but even this broad and humane education was thought of as being for a small and elite group. The essence of higher education has been specialization; and particularly in the modern era has it been a reflection of the fragmentation of society which occurred during the Renaissance, when the different arts and sciences were no longer related to a large structure, but, as Jacques Maritain has put it, "took to living their own lives." This sort of university education was based on the individual person's willingness to accept specialized tasks and acquire specialized skills. It became in our day a standard joke that the highly educated person knew "more and more about less and less." Society made use of the memory of individual men as reservoirs of acquired knowledge and of their imaginations as the recall devices to allow us to duplicate bridges across rivers, repeat cures for

diseases, or reset interest rates for a vigorous economy.

Our society became a federation of specialists. This federation, mechanically structured like a machine, has built an amazing civilization; but whether this civilization can result in a true culture remains a moot question. Our society today is at best a mosaic culture, where each unit is separate, in contact but not in communion with its nearest neighbors. Tolerance becomes the chief virtue in such a society, with our greatest mutual concern being a certain caution against bashing fenders as we back our cars out of garages into shared alleys.

But man is a communal animal. His instinct is to form what the Greeks called a polis, a community; and the bonds within a polis are affection, not tolerance--admiration, not respect. In some general and almost unperceived manner, this machine civilization which we have been constructing for the past three centuries--tending more and more toward alienation and isolation among its members--is in the last few years directed toward the establishment of a culture, toward the blending of the mosaic, toward the reformulation of the community, and the involvement of the person with others.

One evidence of this new unity our machine age is making possible is the decline of specialization brought on by automation. Sometimes it is difficult. The new age--an age in which information is stored and readily available, freeing the imagination--an age

in which the imagination must be turned repeatedly toward the good--this new age is an era in which learning will be Man's chief task. We shall live at the forefront of knowledge. That front will have tremendous extensions with the new knowledge available at all levels, from the very simple to the most abstruse, but every man will recognize that we are making learners of men. Education does not terminate with a degree--any degree; in effect we shall attach each man to the great central nervous system of society at the level of complexity he best fits and at which he is most free and most individual. I do not pretend there are not dangers to a society where freedom is highly interdependent. The very rapidity and power of the age implies a possible instability, and if education is wrongly directed it could lead a society quickly into trouble. The time lag between the school and industry, state, and church even now is quite short and will grow shorter. If the educational system took as its task the changing of the nature of society, the changing of the concept of virtue, for example, we could encounter dangers that man has never before faced. We have more power than it is perhaps safe for a people to have; we can make large-scale changes almost immediately. Our educational system is all-embracing and pervasive; without a clear concept of our true aims, we can make almost irremediable mistakes rather quickly.

What, then, are our aims in education? I think we must say that our aims are the same as those of the great ages of the past:

to produce young men and women who, while holding to the old verities that are essentially unchanging, at the same time seek new forms, new modes, new applications, new dimensions. We seek to produce youngsters who know the magnanimity and heroism of the Greeks, the pietas of the Romans, the uprightness and faith of the Hebrews, the hope and charity of the Christians. We seek to produce men and women who do not exalt themselves into a complete universe but who can humble themselves and renounce their own interests. We seek, in a word, the great human image of MAN - MAN as the Book of Job shows him, as Oedipus Rex, Beowulf, King Lear, Hamlet, Moby Dick, the Brothers Karamazov show him - for, science fiction to the contrary, the creature that must live in the new society and dominate the machine must be, not a creature with a new morality, but the old familiar figure possessing what Father Gardiner has called the frail majesty of man. And in our day, I suspect, this can only be accomplished by a liberal arts education on the college level.

The great increasing danger of the changing scene in education will lie in its becoming completely secular: for the virtues and verities of the West, though pluralistic, have all stemmed from a religious view of life. Without the sacred, man is not man: without the sacred, we have robbed him of a dimension and left him less than human. And we cannot afford to do the utterly new thing of relegating religion completely to the churches. It must enter into lives and so into education -- not alone as specific doctrines, but as virtues and as truths.

It will be your task to live on the frontier of knowledge. It is a task which will demand all your skills, all your imagination, your virtues, your values, your sense of the sacred. It is a difficult task, but it is one in which you can win honor.